

52 JUMBO MINE AND ROOT GLACIER TRAIL

DISTANCE: 12.1 miles roundtrip

TIME: 1.5 days (half day for Root Glacier, full day for Jumbo Mine)

ELEVATION GAIN: 4000 feet

HIGH POINT: 5700 feet

SEASON: June–September

SURFACE: Hardpack, rocks, gravel

GRADE: Sustained steep (Jumbo Mine), rolling (Root Glacier)

INDIGENOUS LAND: Lower Ahtna Athabascan

MANAGING AGENCY: Wrangell–St. Elias National Park and Preserve

MAPS: USGS McCarthy B-6 NE, C-6 SE, C-5 SW, B-5 NW

ONLINE MAP SEARCH: “kennicott ak”

TRAILHEAD GPS: 61.481049°N, 142.885275°W

Historic buildings of the Kennecott Copper Corporation and the nearby, once-boisterous town of McCarthy sit beside the Kennicott Glacier. High above, on precipitous mountain slopes, mines once disgorged precious blue-green ore onto aerial trams to be transported to the mill 4000 feet below. Abandoned wagon roads leading to three of the mines, Jumbo, Bonanza, and Erie, are trails into history. While several trails depart from Kennicott, this itinerary recommends an overnight at the Jumbo Creek camping area with a side trip to Root Glacier, then a rewarding uphill day hike the next day for lunch among castle-like peaks surrounding the site of Jumbo Mine.

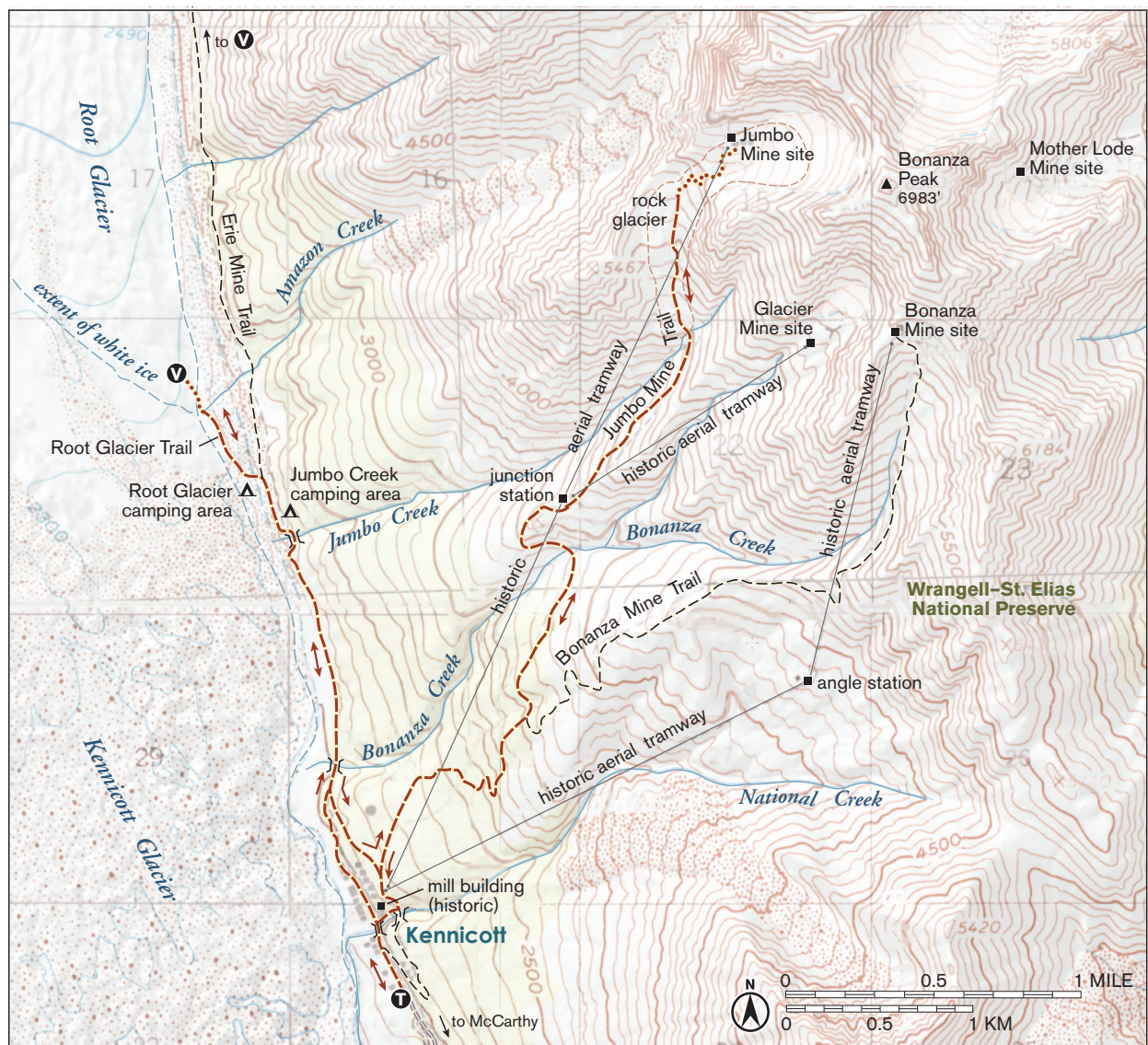
The Lower Ahtna people controlled the copper resources in the Chitina River basin for centuries, leveraging the metal as a valuable trade commodity. Later, at the turn of the twentieth century, white settlers exploited the hospitality of the Ahtna to find and seize control of copper deposits, leading to mining across the region at a massive scale. Five Kennecott mines tapped a total of 4.6 million tons of copper ore, much of it highly profitable chalcocite (nearly 80 percent copper by weight). Producing 591,000 tons of copper and 900,000 ounces of silver, it was one of the richest mining operations in history for its scale. A honeycomb of more than 70 miles of layered tunnels connects the five mines: Erie, Jumbo, Glacier, Bonanza, and Mother Lode. When the mines closed in 1938, the towns of Kennicott and McCarthy died. Through the years, Alaskans who prefer a more remote lifestyle have been reclaiming the settlements. With the area's designation as Wrangell–St. Elias National Preserve, tourists began to visit the area in summertime. The preserve also spurred protection and renovation of historic buildings. Sixty miles of gravel access road discourage some visitors, to the benefit of those who do take this trip.

DRIVING DIRECTIONS

Search online for “mccarthy ak,” then follow these directions. Drive to mile 82.5 of the Richardson Highway (32.5 miles south of Glennallen). Turn east onto the Edgerton Highway, and continue 34 miles to Chitina Village (*Tsedi Na'* in Ahtna). Expect no gas or groceries beyond here. Follow the main road through Chitina as it

becomes mostly gravel and crosses the Copper River bridge.

The 59-mile, primitive gravel McCarthy Road begins here and follows the bed of the old Copper River and Northwestern Railway, which carried ore from Kennicott to Cordova from 1911 to 1938. The road is not recommended for large camper vehicles or trailers. Allow two and a half hours to drive the





The trek from Kennicott to the white ice of Root Glacier and nearby campsites is easier than the steep Jumbo Mine Trail. (Photo by Gretchen Nelson)

rough road, and be prepared for flat tires. The road terminates at the Kennicott River. There is no public bridge for cars (some residents use a private bridge with a seasonal pass at high cost). Park at the river for overnight stays, for a fee, or park near the National Park Service Day Use Area 0.7 mile before the river, and walk the last bit. An alternate access to McCarthy is to fly to the airstrip just outside of town.

Cross the Kennicott River on the footbridge and walk or bike the gravel road east, up a small rise, to an intersection at the McCarthy–Kennicott Historical Museum. This old red railroad depot is well worth a visit. The left fork of the road goes to Kennicott, 4 miles away. The right fork leads quickly

into McCarthy. To reach the trailhead, take a ground shuttle north from the museum to Kennicott. Several shuttles operate between the footbridge, McCarthy, and Kennicott; inquire at the riverside parking lot or in town. Walking or bicycling the road to Kennicott is another option, on a trail that parallels the road near glacial moraines.

ON THE ROUTE

From the shuttle stop in Kennicott, the effective trailhead for this trip, cross the bridge over National Creek and proceed on flat ground on the main street through town (elevation 2000 feet). Follow this old wagon road 0.8 mile through the collection

of historic buildings to a junction with trail signs and a restroom. The options from this junction are to head straight along Kennicott Glacier toward the Root Glacier Trail (a spur off the Erie Mine Trail) or take a hard turn on a four-wheel-drive track uphill toward Jumbo and Bonanza Mines. For now, continue straight.

The walk toward Root Glacier, also known as the White Ice Trail, is on an easy, mostly level footpath with great glacier and mountain views. Almost immediately, the trail crosses Bonanza Creek on a plank bridge. Nearly a mile from the junction, the trail jogs uphill to cross Jumbo Creek on a footbridge. Shortly after Jumbo Creek, at 1.7 miles from the trailhead, there are two separate tent sites with a shared bear-proof food storage locker and outhouse. Although there is an outhouse, campers must supply their own toilet paper and pack out bathroom trash. This is the first possible place to camp. About 0.2 mile farther is the turn to Root Glacier, which flows into Kennicott Glacier below you.

The spur trail to the glacier has been rerouted from time to time. Follow signs toward Root Glacier. A few hundred feet along the descent to the glacial moraine is another food storage locker and several surrounding tent sites. In late June, blue lupine grace the trailside and frame the glacier and mountains in the distance. Stop along the trail or at the edge of the white ice (2.3 miles from the shuttle stop) to enjoy the view of Root Glacier's Stairway Icefall to the north and the majestic white mountains: Mount Blackburn (16,390 feet) and Regal Mountain (13,845 feet). For walking on the glacier, crampons and an ice axe are recommended; the ice can be slippery and, with occasional water holes and bottomless tubes eroded from the ice, dangerous. A guided trip can be arranged in Kennicott or McCarthy and includes the use of crampons and an ice axe. Return

to spend the evening at your camp, resting for the more strenuous day hike to Jumbo Mine tomorrow.

In the morning, backtrack to the trail junction just north of Kennicott. If you are carrying heavy overnight gear that you don't want to haul uphill, consider stashing a pack with rangers at the Kennecott Visitor Center, or find another bear-proof solution. From the junction, head uphill on a clear four-wheel-drive track toward Jumbo and Bonanza Mines. Turn left and uphill at the first major switchback, where another fork continues straight to the top of the mill building, the centerpiece of Kennicott. Above this point and to Bonanza Creek, there is some private land; stay on the trail. Watch for all-terrain vehicle traffic, both from tourist groups and private residents, as you continue on the clear main route at a steady climb. After 1.4 miles, reach another signed junction: the right fork heads to Bonanza Mine; take the left fork to Jumbo Mine.

The first part of the way to Jumbo Mine is an old wagon track. It appears the park occasionally clears encroaching alders. The trail crosses Bonanza Creek 0.6 mile after leaving the last fork, necessitating wet feet, then travels through alder tunnels with occasional clearings featuring wild columbine. On the ridge between Bonanza and Jumbo Creeks is the aging post-and-beam junction station building, an intersection of two aerial tramways that once carried supplies up to and ore down from Jumbo Mine and neighboring Glacier Mine. Look carefully for a spur trail leading left through the alders to the junction station and the nearby operator's house.

Back on the main trail approaching Jumbo Creek, scree slides cover the route, and it is necessary to cross short stretches of steep scree slope. At about 4700 feet, the trail climbs up a massive rock glacier. If you want to camp up here, there is water and a possible campsite at the lower end of the rock glacier.

Follow the remnants of the old track up the rocky footing, or pick your own way where no track is visible, bearing right into a high cirque below Bonanza Peak (elevation 6983 feet). As you climb, notice rocks underfoot shot through with blue-green veins, telltale of the coveted copper, and tramway cables slicing the sky above. On a topographic bench along the north side of the high cirque, 4 miles from the start of the uphill climb and at elevation 5700 feet, with luck, you will find relics from the old mine.

On the way down, take a shortcut from the final switchback to reach the top of the mill building, a nice overlook, then continue straight past it to pick up a trail that descends along the north side of National Creek to reach the heart of Kennicott. Be sure to spend some time exploring the historic mill town before catching the shuttle back. Walking tours are worthwhile, and the Kennicott Glacier Lodge is filled with memorabilia. Ask about the two spellings of

Castlelike formations near Jumbo Mine provide a backdrop for the historic junction station.



Kennicott. For more relics and old photographs, visit the McCarthy Lodge, built in the early 1900s. Rent bicycles or arrange commercial raft trips at the river. If you camp near McCarthy, find a spot near the Kennicott River. Clear Creek, which you cross as you walk into McCarthy, supplies drinking water to residents; be careful not to contaminate it. Please remember that all structures and land in McCarthy and some in Kennicott are privately owned—do not enter buildings, take relics, or use old lumber for firewood.

SHORTER OPTIONS

A stroll through Kennicott is enough of a destination in itself. To get off the main wagon road, a roughly 1-mile loop leads uphill on a sinuous switchback past historic cottages on the south side of National Creek, then crosses a charming bridge before descending along the north side of the creek. Stop to look out at the top of the mill building.

Root Glacier alone makes a 4.6-mile day hike from the shuttle stop to white ice and back. Jumbo Mine alone is a 9.6-mile roundtrip day hike from the shuttle stop. Bonanza Mine, on a relatively straightforward uphill route similar to Jumbo, is roughly 9 miles roundtrip.

The Erie Mine Trail continues past the Root Glacier cutoff, paralleling the glacier's edge along moraine. The trail culminates where mine cables cross the trail and a historic bunkhouse is visible 3000 feet above on the hillside, but it does not reach the mine itself. Views up valley are well worth the roughly 8 miles roundtrip from Kennicott.

EXTENDING YOUR TRIP

Donoho Basin is the green peninsula of land caught between the flowing Kennicott and Root Glaciers. To get there requires crossing the full width of Root Glacier from Kennicott; education and confidence

in glacier travel are essential. There are two designated National Park Service campsites with food storage lockers, one at each of the two lakes in the basin. A backpacking trip of two to four days or

more is possible as an independent or guided trip (see the Resources section). Groups of eight or more must register with the Park Service; see their website for more information.

53 MOONLIGHT ODYSSEY AT THOMPSON PASS

DISTANCE: 6 miles roundtrip

TIME: Half day

ELEVATION GAIN: 2000 feet

HIGH POINT: 4400 feet

SEASON: Late June–September

SURFACE: Tundra, snow, rocks

GRADE: Moderate with steep segments

INDIGENOUS LAND: Chugach Sugpiaq (Alutiiq) and Lower Ahtna Athabascan

MANAGING AGENCY: Alaska Division of Mining, Land, and Water

MAP: USGS Valdez A-5

ONLINE MAP SEARCH: “thompson pass ak”

TRAILHEAD GPS: 61.127016°N, 145.728433°W

Sunrise at Thompson Pass is a time to gaze out across gaping valleys, savoring sun-kissed glacial bowls speared through with rocky spires. This pass, a larger-than-life highway route through the Chugach Mountains east of Valdez, is beloved by backcountry skiers and snowmachiners for its record-breaking snows in winter, though most people experience it through their windshields as a particularly scenic section of the Richardson Highway. Pulling over to hike from the highway, or maybe even camp for the night, allows remarkably quick access to rolling tundra terraces dotted with alpine lakes. This out-and-back route follows a natural bench from the highway near the pass, then turns up a gully to Moonlight Basin and climbs to the ridge next to Odyssey peak for views of Worthington Glacier on the other side.

DRIVING DIRECTIONS

Search online for “thompson pass ak,” or follow these directions. Parking for this route is a highway pullout 0.1 mile south of milepost 26 on the Richardson Highway, 26 miles from Valdez and 89 miles

from Glennallen. Heading southbound, look for a steep rock cut forming the highway bed at the pass itself and, shortly after the cut, a large gravel pullout on the right. Park here.